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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 000381

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SUBJECT: DAS MARCIEL ENGAGES THAI LEADERS ON BILATERAL
ISSUES, CAMBODIA, REFUGEE POLICY, REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE,
AND BURMA

REF: A. BANGKOK 344 (THAI-CAMBODIA)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 362 (DOMESTIC DEVELOPMENTS)

Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. EAP DAS and Ambassador for ASEAN Affairs Scot Marciel engaged the Thai MFA PermSec and PM deputy SecGen, as well as several prominent Thai thinkers, on key regional and bilateral issues during his February 10 visit to Bangkok. Issues included regional architecture, U.S.-Thai relations, Burma, Thai-Cambodia relations, and Thai refugee policy. DAS Marciel discussed U.S. engagement in the East Asia Summit (EAS) as one way to enhance U.S. engagement in Asia; PermSec Theerakul supported increased U.S. engagement in Thailand and the region. On Burma's 2010 elections, possibly to occur in May, both sides agreed that such an early date left little room for free and transparent elections based on dialogue with opposition and ethnic groups. RTG officials noted that they had encouraged Burma to engage with opposition groups; patience was necessary when engaging with Burma. DAS Marciel stressed that even with the Obama administration modified policy approach, Burma would have to make some positive steps before the U.S. could consider removing sanctions.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary, cont: DAS Marciel raised U.S. concerns about Thai handling of the Lao Hmong and Karen repatriations, and warned that if Thailand again forcibly repatriated displaced persons, it would lead to a strong reaction from the U.S. MFA PermSec Theerakul and PM deputy Sec-Gen Panitan both denied that the recent attempt to return displaced Karen to Burma would have been involuntary, but noted plans were in motion to send independent observers to the camp to interview the refugees directly. Panitan and other interlocutors at a group working lunch were very much focused on the state of Thai-Cambodian relations in the wake of Hun Sen's latest rhetorical attack against Thai PM Abhisit. End summary.

U.S.-THAI RELATIONSHIP OVERLOOKED BUT STILL PRODUCTIVE

[1](#)3. (C) DAS Marciel, MFA PermSec Theerakul, and the DCM engaged in a candid conversation about how to enhance the U.S.-Thai bilateral relationship February 10. DAS Marciel acknowledged that the U.S.-Thai relationship was occasionally overlooked and that the two nations needed to remind their publics of the strong bonds and long-standing cooperation. He posed the possibility of the U.S. becoming involved in the East Asia Summit (EAS) process as one way to enhance regional

engagement. PermSec Theerakul replied that Thailand would likely support U.S. participation in the EAS but would need to consult with the other ASEAN nations.

¶4. (C) PermSec Theerakul believed that increasing opportunities for exchanges, official and informal, between the two nations could also enhance the U.S.-Thai relationship. He expressed PM Abhisit's interest in making an official visit to the U.S. in 2010, and his hope that President Obama would visit Thailand as well. FM Kasit wanted to participate directly in the still-to-be-scheduled Strategic Dialogue with A/S Kurt Campbell. Theerakul noted that it seemed fewer Thai students were going to the U.S. to study than in the past, and he hoped that we might work together to address this in order to strengthen people-people connectivity.

¶5. (C) The DCM highlighted Thailand's December seizure of North Korean weapons at the Don Muang airport as an example of how well the two nations work together on high profile policy priorities. He noted that the USG would continue to work with Thailand to ensure that they met the UNSCR 1874 obligation to dispose of the weapons. The DCM also informed Theerakul that the upcoming unsealing of a second indictment against Viktor Bout would result in a second extradition request to Thailand (previously previewed to working-level MFA and Office of the Attorney-General staff).

BURMA ELECTIONS, IF IN MAY, LEAVE LITTLE HOPE FOR LEGITIMACY

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¶6. (C) DAS Marciel shared that he had received word from senior Cambodian officials that Burma's elections would most likely be held in May. He expressed alarm that such an early date left little hope for a credible and free process, adding that an election in Burma that was neither free nor fair could put ASEAN in a difficult position. PermSec Theerakul said the Thai Embassy in Rangoon had reported the same about the May date and that he believed that the junta was serious in its intentions to hold an election. He shared the worry, however, that the "groundwork is not there" for a free and fair election. The PermSec further noted that Thailand - as the Chair of ASEAN in 2009 - had pushed the GOB to open dialogue with the opposition in order to move towards becoming a more democratic society. That said, expectations should not be high for change in Burma, considering the nation had been a closed society for over fifty years.

¶7. (C) DAS Marciel emphasized that the USG had modified its approach to Burma under the Obama administration, but that Burma still needed to take steps in the right direction. The USG would like to see that some steps are made - no matter how small - towards democracy. With such progress, the USG could consider reducing sanctions in response. Unfortunately, Burma had made no attempts yet to reach out to the opposition parties or ethnic groups, DAS Marciel said. In a separate group lunch, PM deputy SecGen and Acting Government Spokesman Panitan shared DAS Marciel's concerns about May elections prior to progress on dialogue. While PM Abhisit had been hoping to travel to Burma for over a year, he had made meeting Aung Sang Suu Kyi a precondition. Elections in May would not allow time for sufficient progress, Panitan commented, and probably push any Abhisit trip to the second half of the year.

CONCERNS OVER FORCED REPATRIATIONS: HMONG AND KAREN

¶8. (C) DAS Marciel shared his concerns in both meetings about the February 5 attempt to involuntarily repatriate displaced Karen back to Burma (note: 3 families/12 individuals were returned before further operations were suspended after U.S. officials intervened. End note). In particular, many were concerned about the potential loss of

life due to landmines in the Karen villages in Burma. DAS Marciel noted previous USG advocacy by the Ambassador and others (including Admiral Willard) and strongly urged PermSec Theerakul and Panitan to move forward carefully on this issue, as both the U.S. Administration and Congress was following closely and would react strongly to involuntary Karen returns in the wake of the December Hmong repatriation.

Even though the reports so far on the treatment of the returned Hmong in Laos had been encouraging in some regards, the lack of transparency in the return had sparked concern in Washington, Marciel reported.

¶9. (C) Panitan expressed concern about the damage refugee policy issues could cause to the U.S.-Thai relationship, but stressed that Thailand was acting on principles. On the Hmong, the RTG had been obligated to work with Laos on the return of the Hmong but would follow up on adherence to their promises of fair treatment and international access back in Laos; the Thai military would make a visit in the second half of February to a resettlement site to check on the situation.

DAS Marciel confirmed that Lao officials had informed him of those plans during his recent discussions in Vientiane.

¶10. (C) Regarding the Karen, PermSec Theerakul insisted that the recent efforts to repatriate Karen were voluntary. He believed it was the RTG's responsibility to support their wishes to return, and to provide security to them if they alternately wished to stay. The MFA did not want local military officers making decisions on returns because of the potential consequences to the Karen as well as to Thailand. Panitan reconfirmed that the return had been put on hold and that the RTG would be inviting observers to talk to the displaced Karen.

¶11. (C) Human Rights Watch's Sunai Phasuk, in the same lunch meeting as Panitan, took issue with the RTG views, predicting that the Royal Thai Army (RTA) would continue to seek to send

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the Karen back. Sunai expressed concern that Thai civilian officials seemed to be accepting military accusations that NGOs and even UNHCR representatives were lobbying the displaced Karen against return. Both Sunai and Democrat Party MP Kraisaak Choonhavan, a long-time Burma activist, told Panitan that he and PM Abhisit needed to expand their sources of information on the issue.

THAI-CAMBODIA RELATIONS: TORTURED HISTORY

¶12. (SBU) In the wake of Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's harsh statements against PM Abhisit (ref A), Thai-Cambodia relations were discussed extensively in the meetings. PermSec Theerakul expressed concern that Hun Sen's recent statements regarding Abhisit would make it difficult to move toward a resolution of outstanding border issues between the two nations.

¶13. (C) Panitan suggested Hun Sen's increasing malevolence towards the RTG might stem from personal resentment toward PM Abhisit, the influence of fugitive former PM Thaksin, or perhaps fatigue over dealing with a multitude of new Thai administrations over the years. Panitan stated candidly that he understood Hun Sen's frustration with Thailand's frequently changing governments and bureaucratic procedures, making resolution of bilateral issues much more difficult. When there were discussions of prisoner exchanges in early 2009, Hun Sen delivered on the return of several Thai "within 48 hours"; the counterpart Thai judicial review of 3 Cambodian incarcerations is still ongoing months later. Panitan expressed the RTG's intention to continue to work with Hun Sen towards a resolution of border disputes/demarcation and to be patient; PM Abhisit had intentionally not responded publicly to Hun Sen's outburst. The Thai and Cambodian regional commanders maintained good relations, which is important for managing incidents calmly.

¶14. (C) Kraissak, who helped dramatically reorient Thai policy towards Cambodia during his father Chatchai's 1988-91 stint as PM, stated that both Thailand and Cambodia were guilty of manipulating the conflict for nationalistic purposes, and that the contentious history of recent decades continued to affect bilateral relations. To be fair to Hun Sen, Thailand had spent the 1980s funding the joint Cambodian resistance seeking to oust his Vietnamese-backed regime from power, and Thailand's cultural soft power, through TV soaps and radio programming, was significant in Cambodia. Even Thaksin and Hun Sen had a complicated history; Thaksin had been PM in 2003 when Hun Sen instigated the xenophobic burning of the Thai embassy and 38 Thai-owned businesses in Cambodia. Kraissak alleged that Thaksin bought Hun Sen's cooperation at a 2004 summit in which he made a \$125 million donation to Hun Sen, but the subsequent Hun Sen pledge to compensate the Thai companies for their losses had never been fulfilled.

¶15. (C) Kraissak felt the ultimate shared benefits that could overcome the mutual animosity lay in a Joint Development Arrangement (JDA) for disputed maritime areas in the Gulf of Thailand, akin to the very successful Thai-Malaysian JDA from the late 1990s. Kraissak faulted successive Thai governments for not being more flexible in negotiating with Hun Sen, suggesting that, like Australia's JDA with East Timor, Thailand would ultimately benefit from the lion's share of on-shore value-added refinery business.

¶15. (C) DAS Marciel hoped that the RTG would work with Cambodia to resolve the issue rather than allow it to reach a point where the international community felt compelled to intervene. He also suggested Thailand explore ways to publicize collaboration - whether government-led or not - between the two nations on other issues in order to build trust. Kraissak mentioned the educational initiatives launched by Princess Sirindhorn in Cambodia; Panitan confirmed that the most recent Thai Cabinet meeting had agreed to expand funding for her Cambodian initiative, and also noted the ongoing Thai program to legalize 150,000 Cambodian (and other) illegal migrants working in Thailand. All Thai interlocutors agreed that the conflict building between the two nations could have negative implications for

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both countries and the region.

¶16. (U) DAS Marciel did not clear this message.
JOHN